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Interview

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Interview with Stephen Kantrowitz, Professor of History and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Wisconsin, and recently named a finalist for the Gilder Lehrman Douglass Prize

Interviewed by Michael Frawley

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is proud to speak with Stephen Kantrowitz, Professor of History and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Wisconsin. We will be discussing his recent book *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic 1829-1889.* Thank you for joining us today.

Stephen Kantrowitz (SK): I am really happy to be with you.

CWBR: Based off the title of your book, could you explain why you chose the dates that you did since most people see your subject as something intimately connected with the war years?

SK: Yeah, the reason behind the wider parameters there is that the black freedom struggle in the nineteenth century is closely, intimately related to the Civil War era. Its normal dates and topics and events, but it isn't totally identical to it. The black freedom struggle that I'm charting begins with the publication of David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizen's* in 1829-1830. Which from my perspective establishes the idea that African-Americans are going to forcefully claim a place in the American nation. But not only that, it is possible for them to do so by making an alliance with whites and being their friends. I don't say that in a casual way, Walker truly believes that it is possible for whites and blacks to

share a country. That will mean changing the hearts of white people. It is that project, as much as the project as ending slavery, as much as the project of transforming the legal, or constitutional status of African-Americans that he and his comrades are after during that entire period. To 1889, is a little less clear as a date. The reason I chose that date has a lot to do with the life of a person who is central to the arch of the book, which is Lewis Hayden, who was a fugitive slave who becomes one of the key activists in the black Boston community of the nineteenth century. He dies in 1889. That is the year before the lodge elections bill fails, that is the year before the Mississippi disenfranchising constitution passes, it really is the end of an era that something like David Walker and his friends would have imagined as possible earlier in the century.

CWBR: You chose Boston as the focus of your work. Why did you choose this city over others with large free African American populations like New York or Philadelphia?

SK: Two reasons for that, first it is personal. I am from suburban Boston, I am from Brookline, and in the course of exploring the history of the free black communities in the North, I realized that I felt a very powerful personal connection to the place, and found the strangeness and difference of the history that I was exploring relative to my own experience of the place, really a powerful motivator that kept me going and connected to the project in many ways over the course of a decade. I think there is a much more important intellectual reason for doing this project and that is free black people are the freest and most equal in Massachusetts. There freer and more equal in Massachusetts than any other polity or context in North America, or at least in the United States. Black men have the right to vote, and have few formal restrictions on their lives. Therefore we get to see the limits of the possible. We also get to see a place where slavery has been extinguished since the 1780s, and so there is a long, long history of freedom. We also have a white climate that is more open to anti-slavery abolitionist ideas comparatively early. So, Boston is a great place to test the limits of the possible. It is a great place to see how far things could go, and it is wonderful for that reason too because it is in Boston that the first important interracial coalitions devoted to anti-slavery and equality emerge in the form of New England anti-slavery society and the Liberator and that world. This makes Boston a wonderful place to see how far it was possible to imagine how things would go.

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CWBR: African Americans in Boston identified themselves as "colored citizens," how important was this term to the fight for citizenship?

SK: It is a surprisingly important term, and one that kept coming up over the course of the research. Not because I think everybody in that world had read David Walker, it is not clear to me that they had. The term itself survives and establishes a foothold in people's imaginations and it does so, as something to aspire to. That is people say, we the "colored citizen's" assemble to do this or that, and you will find that language throughout the anti-slavery press, you'll find it in petitions, you'll find it throughout the Civil War and beyond. People use it to express their hope that they can be both "colored" and citizens. African Americans also use this term ironically, they use it to suggest that many people think this term is an oxymoron in fact, and that we are incapable of being citizens because we are "colored." African Americans understand that use a lot of other terms that signal the same things. Like, "Aliened-Americans," or the term "2/3 free," that is one of David Walker's phrases, or the "nominally free." There are a lot of other phrases like these that play upon this idea of skepticism. "Colored Citizens" is really critical, and at one point, was actually the title of the book.

CWBR: Was the rhetoric and legacy of the American Revolution important to helping African Americans see a path to citizenship? Is following this "American" pattern helping African Americans to gain citizenship?

SK: Well to some degree. But I would phrase it a little differently. I would say African Americans are they themselves aware that they had participated in the Revolution. So say, George Middleton, a Revolutionary War veteran, is one of the stalwarts of the community in the early nineteenth century on Beacon Hill. There are a large number of memories of the so called "bucks" of America, a black unit that was presented a flag by John Hancock. So, what I am suggesting is that the relationship to the Revolution is not one of the Revolution happened, we can use this event and therefore analogize our freedom struggle to the American Revolution's freedom struggle. Instead, we are going to seize that freedom struggle as though it were our own which it only was in part of course. The best example of this is the way that slavery comes to an end in Massachusetts. Which is, well there are many slaves in Massachusetts in the 1780s. However, in the middle of the decade, a series of court cases brought by Massachusetts slaves in which they sue for their freedom based upon the first line of the Massachusetts constitution. Which is "All men are born free and equal." On the basis of that simple utterance, they say how can slavery exist when all

men are born free? The courts agree, and the Supreme Court agrees that slavery is unenforceable. Slavery collapses. So, the Revolution offers some of the tool kit for establishing freedom, but it is black people seizing that opportunity and leveraging those universal principles into something that will work for them in their own lives. That is the importance of the American Revolution for them. You can see this in the way that William Cooper Nell approaches the Revolution when he writes *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* in 1855. He is very carefully deploying a partial record of black military service and other achievements, to make a case that African Americans had always been integral to the American national project. Now, he leaves out the fact that many African Americans took up the British offer to serve with them in exchange for freedom. This had been the case in every war where they had been an opportunity to serve one side or another for freedom. So, he writes a very selective account in order to make the case, because, well, he is a propagandist as well as a historian. So, it is a complex relationship, but the Revolution is absolutely useful too and important too to the black freedom struggle in the nineteenth century.

CWBR: How important was the relationship between black activists and white supporters, why was this relationship needed in order to move citizenship forward?

SK: So, we think about the United States in 1850 or 1860, there are about 250,000 free black Northerners, there are somewhere around 20 million white Northerners. There is no way that 250,000 people even if they were all enfranchised, even if they were all activists, which of course they are not. There is no way that this tiny group of people can assert itself politically and transform a white republic, into a non-racial republic. What they can do is recruit white allies. That is the reason that 1829 is such an important date. It is the first time we hear free blacks appeal to whites In David Walker's appeal when he says, "What a happy country this will be if the whites will listen." William Lloyd Garrison and a handful of others do appear to listen to that, and their willingness to extend themselves over the color line at great social cost, and enormous lifetime that many of these individuals make to that struggle. That ability to do that and show that this is a cause worth doing is the turning point for African American participation and belonging in the American body politic, and American social life, and American cultural and political life. So, I think it is absolutely critical and tough, it is not easy, and as with any struggles white people at any moment can decide to go home, and retreat to a world of comfort. That doesn't involve constant struggle, and their black counterparts do not have this option, and so

there is an inequality built into the struggle itself. On the other hand, some of the white people last in the struggle for decades, and some last for their entire lives. The book charts some of the ways in which some of the white allies disappoint and desert and betray their black coalition partners. On the other hand, it shows people who had been bitter enemies like Benjamin Butler, turn out to be for critical moments really important allies. So, it's a mixed bag, but it is a really important story because it is what makes that change possible for a specific group of people.

CWBR: Why was the formation of organizations, public and private, from Masons to militias, so central to your book?

SK: There are central to the story of this because, for the most part, I said that black men were enfranchised in Massachusetts, but they are excluded from virtually every white dominated institution, organization, political party, and political club. So, in order to learn the function as political beings, to learn how institutions work, to learn how constitutions are written, to learn how meetings are run, to learn all the basic elements of political life African Americans have to turn to one another to do it. And it is through these organizations that they do these things, in much the same way that Europeans had turned to one another in the eighteenth century in the middle of the "Enlightenment" and begun to constitute themselves as independent societies, which were not under the control of the state or the church. It is a much the same story as that, except in the American context it is not threatening to a king or church and thus they can do. If they try to do it in Richmond or Charleston, or in New Orleans, it would have been construed as a precursor to a slave revolt. In this context they can do it and they learn to do. The second reason is less practical and more transcendent, that is they are mostly poor people. These are mostly people who experience a lot of hostility and neglect in their daily lives, as members of a very small stigmatized minority. So, to have a place to go where they constitute themselves as whole, special, important that is really important to them and their understanding of themselves and one another, and their ability to turn to the wider world with a sense of they are worthy of the things they imagine. This takes place in churches, it takes place in schools, it takes place in masonic and other kinds of fraternal organizations. Wherever it takes place I think it is part of a dialectic, a necessary back and forth between the retreat to a place of security and comfort and the knowledge that one needs to move out from that world into the world where you might make some transformative change.

CWBR: How does the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act change how African Americans work to preserve their freedom?

SK: Well the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 upends their politics. There had been efforts to capture fugitives, and rescue fugitives prior to that; examples include the Lattimore war in the 1840s. But at the same time they had not had the concerted weight of the federal government pursuing a pro-slavery political project in this way. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 signals to African Americans that the Federal Government has abandoned whatever ambivalence had characterized it at some point. And instead has decided to become active agents for slaveholders, and that is really threatening. It warns a fair number of far-sighted African American intellectuals that the Dred Scott decision is coming. Martin Delany as early as 1854, remarks, "forget these personal liberty laws, our fate is in the hands of the federal government, that is where the fate of our liberties will be decided." That turns out to be true. So, it is hard to overstate the importance of the Fugitive Slave law, it causes some people to flee, it forces others to become more militant. It ignites the political crisis of the 1850s, and it accelerates the spiral from Kansas/Nebraska, to Bleeding Kansas, to John Brown, to the beginning of the war itself.

CWBR: Speaking of militant, when the war finally does come we have this popular picture of free African Americans pushing to join the army, and help fight for freedom. However, is that the case 100%, in at least the North or in Boston. What issues did the free African American community of Boston have with joining the army, based on what their idea of citizenship was? **SK:** So, when recruitment begins for the 54th and later the 55th and the 5th cavalry, black Bostonians bring to that effort their own history with military recruitment. For them, the last ten years have been crucial because for ten years black Bostonians have been trying to establish a black unit of the state militia, with black officers accredited and admitted and enrolled in the militia in the same way as any other unit. That is, enrolled on the terms of perfect equality with other units. That fits with their whole idea that engagement as citizens of the American nation requires a transformation of the American nation so that it abandons its commitment to whiteness. For example, they are not only asking to be chartered as a unit of the state militia they want the want the state to remove the word white from its state militia law. That is a key feature here, which the state won't do, because that is part of federal law. So, they run up against this over and over again, and in frustration their militia movement collapses and they never march and it is a kind of a fiasco. It is not a fiasco though at the end of the day, because what it does is

it sets the table for the conversation at the end of the day that happens in 1863, and that conversation says: it is great that the Union has decided to honor our desire to serve against the slaveholders, but it has to be on terms of equality. Initially they think they are going to be offered the same pay as white soldiers, they are promised that in the recruiting for the 54th. People like Robert Morrison and John DeGrasse go to the governor and say: we need to have black officers appointed. Governor Andrew approaches the War Department, and is told in no uncertain terms this will not happen. Faced with a situation where they are not going to treated as equals, where they can't have black officers, black units will be led by white officers, Morrison and his friends say nope we are not going. The proof is in the pudding here, the commitment of black Bostonians is not universal but it is strong enough when the 54th marches through Boston on its way to South Carolina in the spring of 1863, there is nearly 1000 men marching through the streets but only about 40 of them declare Boston as their hometown. Compare that to the initial movement to form a home guard to defend Massachusetts at the moment of secession in 1861. In one night they get 125 men to sign up, here they had weeks, and weeks to recruit and they only had about 40. That tells the story, as for equality a lot of people simply aren't willing to serve, and when it turns out they are going to be paid as military laborers, and not private soldiers, many of them think twice about what they have done. Some of them have to be sent home, they strike for pay. When the state of Massachusetts offers to make up the difference in pay they say that won't do. The Federal Government has to recognize our equal service with equal pay, if we take extra pay from Massachusetts it makes it look like the money is the point, of course the money is not the point, the principle is the point. By 1864, Congress ends up passing the Equalization Act, ultimately pay is pretty much equalized for everybody. They do win that fight, but it really is a painful struggle though.

CWBR: When the war ends slavery ends, now the struggle for citizenship though has really just begun. What did the activists in Boston hope to accomplish in a world without slavery, and how well were they able to reach out to their newly free southern brethren and help and tie together with them this push for Citizenship?

SK: This is where the great disappointment of their story begins. Neither the effort to build on their wartime victory, and on the early constitutional amendments, or the outreach to the newly free people bears the kind of fruit that they thought it would. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments are transcendentally important. They understand how important these things are to

ending slavery, and national path to citizenship, and there cannot be racial discrimination in obtaining the franchise. Few things can be as important as these, they also see the limits of them. Some of the people in this world oppose the ratification of the 14th Amendment because it doesn't go far enough. It does allow southern states to continue discrimination against the right to vote, if they are willing to pay the penalty of a proportional reduction of representation in Congress. That seems like a total betrayal to people like Edwin Garrison Walker. The 15th Amendment likewise, a lot of these folks believed that should have included women too. Many black activists in the Boston community, men and women, are some of the best women's rights advocates in the United States. They are very disappointed to see the 15th Amendment go forward, for not speaking about sex as well as race. They are also disappointed that the right to vote might not be limited on the basis of race, as opposed to an affirmative right to vote. What happens quickly thereafter, black Northerners find themselves marginalized and treated as second class citizens, in much the same way as black Southerners are experiencing. They are described as mob like and incapable, as really not quite ready for the full exercises and privileges of citizenship. When it comes to the freed people, I think black Northerners because of the power of their vision and the power of their literacy, because of their institutions initially feel as though they are going to shape freedom. They are going to teach the free people how to live as citizens rather than slaves. But the free people have ideas of their own. They have not grown up in an institutional framework ,have not grown up under constitutions, they live in a different cultural and political world. So, it is very difficult for, say, ministers who have been trained in the North, or for that matter Masonic organizers, to use the same tools that they used in the North to build political or cultural institutions in the South. Although they often rise to prominence in southern Reconstruction politics, they don't build the same world that they had lived in in the North. It is just not possible, in terms of life, in terms of labor. The violence of the labor struggle in the South are just too different from what they know. It is a story of surprises and disappointments.

CWBR: Professor Kantrowitz, I appreciate you taking the time to discuss your most recent work, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*. Thank you for joining us today.

SK: It has been a great pleasure.